

Saudi Arabia: The Attack near Tabuk

Summary

Several French nationals were shot dead Feb. 26 near a tourist site in northwestern Saudi Arabia. The hit-and-run attack is consistent with the behavior of al Qaeda's Saudi node during its peak season in 2004.

Analysis

Three French nationals were shot dead and one was seriously injured Feb. 26 in Saudi Arabia in what appears to be a militant attack, according to Saudi television. A group of eight French nationals, some of them Muslims and a few who are believed to be engineers, reportedly came under fire near the town of Tabuk, in the northwest of the country, about 11 miles north of Medina. The victims were traveling to Mecca for a pilgrimage when they were attacked on the road between Medina and Tabuk. A source at the scene said the group of predominantly French Westerners was heading south back toward Medina and had stopped for a picnic near a tourist site of ancient ruins. They had just finished eating when a car drove up and a gunman shot all four male members of the party. The women and children in the group were unharmed.

The Saudi al Qaeda node, formally known as the al Qaeda Organization in the Arabian Peninsula, apparently has resurfaced after a severe crackdown by Saudi security forces that began in June 2004. The recent release of Sawt Al Jihad, a prominent al Qaeda publication, indicated that the group had managed to pull itself back together after a nearly 22-month hiatus.

This attack is consistent with the group's behavior under the leadership of Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin, who took over the Saudi operations in March 2004 after the previous leader, Khaled Ali al-Haj, was killed in a shootout with Saudi security forces. Before al-Muqrin met the same fate as his predecessor in June 2004, the Saudi al Qaeda branch pulled off a number of similar attacks in which Westerners were singled out and shot. The following attacks took place in 2004, when al Qaeda activity in the kingdom was at its peak:

- **May 22:** German chef Hermann Bengler is shot dead at the Jarir Bookstore in Riyadh.
- **June 6:** Irish cameraman for the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) Simon Cumbers is shot and killed, and a BBC correspondent is seriously wounded while filming in Riyadh.
- **June 8:** Robert Jacobs, an American employee of Vinnell Corp., is shot dead at his residence in Riyadh.
- **June 13:** American expatriate Kenneth Scroggs is killed, and American Lockheed Martin employee Paul Johnson is kidnapped at a fake police checkpoint and later beheaded.
- **Aug. 4:** Irish expatriate Tony Christopher is shot dead at his office in Riyadh.
- **Sept. 15:** Edward Muirhead-Smith, a British worker for Marconi, is shot and killed at a grocery store in Riyadh.
- **Sept. 26:** Laurent Barbot, a French employee of a defense electronics firm, is shot dead in his car in Jeddah.

In addition to these hit-and-run attacks, Islamist militants pulled off a number of significant attacks against energy and government targets in the kingdom. In May 2004, al Qaeda militants shot and killed five Western energy workers (two Americans, two Britons and an Australian) at the ABB Lummus Global offices in the Red Sea city of Yanbu. Later that month, al Qaeda militants attacked the Oasis housing compound in the city of Khobar and held approximately 50 people hostage in the offices, leaving 22 people -- including Westerners, other foreign nationals and Saudi citizens -- dead.

In each of these attacks, the intent was to target Saudi economic interests by raising the cost for Western workers to operate in the kingdom and driving up world oil prices through a series of threats and attacks against the energy sector. After al-Muqrin's death, the capabilities of al Qaeda's Saudi node were severely degraded. The group launched its last significant attack -- a failed attempt to strike an oil processing center in Abqaiq -- in February 2006 after an extensive lull. Saudi sources in jihadist circles have confirmed that the al Qaeda Saudi branch has realized the difficulty in targeting these well-protected government and energy targets, and that a greater emphasis will be placed on armed attacks against Western targets in order to inject a heavy dose of insecurity into Western workers in the Saudi kingdom. Though Saudi security forces will launch a renewed crackdown against Islamist militant forces in the country, this latest attack likely is part of a concerted effort by al Qaeda to revive the Saudi militant theater, with similar shootings against Westerners to follow.

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